

Pray Audaciously

Genesis 18:16-32 (NIV)

¹⁶ When the men got up to leave, they looked down toward Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way. ¹⁷ Then the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" ¹⁸ Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. ¹⁹ For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." ²⁰ Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous ²¹ that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know." ²² The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. ²³ Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" ²⁴ What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it?" ²⁵ Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" ²⁶ The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake." ²⁷ Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, ²⁸ what if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five people?" "If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it." ²⁹ Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?" He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it." ³⁰ Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?" He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." ³¹ Abraham said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?" He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it." ³² Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?" He answered, "For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it."

Moment of self-reflection: if you were to describe your prayer life with a single adjective, what would that adjective be? Is your prayer life strong? Consistent? Bold? Persistent? Forgetful? Meek? Humble? Confident? Powerful? Effective? Audacious? Your prayer life may be some of these things, or your prayer life may be all of these things. What should our prayer life look like? Let's examine another believer's prayer to help us answer that question.

How would you describe Abraham's prayer in our first Bible reading for today? The biggest component that jumps out is the fact that Abraham brings six successive petitions whereby he starts out pleading to spare the city and people of Sodom if only 50 righteous people are there to then eventually settling on sparing them if only 10 righteous people can be found. What's the adjective for a prayer like that? Do we call that bargaining? Do we call that bold? Do we call it daring? What's the adjective for "Let's make a deal"?

Some are uncomfortable with Abraham's prayer here in Genesis 18 for this very reason. They think that no person should ever bargain with God or keep changing the terms. They would describe this prayer as disrespectful, as if Abraham remember his place as the created talking to the Creator. But is that really Abraham's attitude in this prayer?

Listen to how he starts out the prayer. He asks God, "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" (verse 23) Will you lump these two people together as if they should be treated the same by God? Will you really kill believers and unbelievers together with absolutely no distinction? Abraham confesses that that's not the kind of God you are. "Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (verse 25) The right thing for you to do, God, is not to sweep away the righteous with the wicked. This is not what you do.

Abraham starts his prayer by appealing to God's nature - who he is - because God cannot violate who he is and therefore he cannot violate what is right to do in this situation. While appealing to God on the basis of his nature, Abraham is not even praying for himself. There is some vested interest here because his nephew Lot and his family are living there. But even then Abraham and his household, his wife, his future child, all his servants, all his flocks, all his possession will not be affected by God's judgment of Sodom. Abraham is offering this prayer on behalf of people that he once saved, that he rescued from the hands of other kings who had conquered them and carried them off as spoils of war. Abraham owes the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah nothing. Abraham's prayer is self-less.

Add on top of this how Abraham describes himself during his prayer. "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes..." (verse 27) "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak..." (verse 30) "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord..." (verse 31) "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more..." (verse 32) Abraham is very aware of his place. He is self-professed nothing but dust and ashes. He is dirt. He will die. He is the created. He cannot tell his Creator what to do. He knows that his request is bold. So, he entreats God by asking him not to be angry with his boldness as he petitions on behalf of the people of Sodom, mainly for the sake of any righteous people living there. This is not arrogance or irreverence on the part of Abraham talking to God, but this is bold. This is daring. This is an audacious prayer!

Why can Abraham pray to the Lord so audaciously? Why is this not wrong? It's because of who the Lord is and what he did. He came to Abraham. He chose Abraham. He chose to give Abraham a blessing beyond Abraham's wildest imagination: to make him a great and powerful nation. The Lord chose Abraham to carry the promise of the Messiah, of the Christ, when he said "all nations on earth will be blessed through [Abraham]." (verse 18) The Lord chose Abraham "so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." (verse 19)

Because God had come to Abraham and had chosen him, God also decided to reveal to him that he was about to judge Sodom and Gomorrah's wickedness. The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" (verse 17) His internal question was answered as he told Abraham that he was going to intervene in human affairs and bring immediate judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah. He did not hide it from Abraham. Without actually asking for it, he was seeking Abraham's thoughts and comments on the situation. Abraham could pray so boldly, so daringly to the LORD because God had decided to come to him. God had decided to reveal to him his plans. God had decided to remain with Abraham while the other two men – the angels - left to go to Sodom.

If that's not enough to justify Abraham's audacious prayer, then consider what Jesus says in our Gospel reading. He teaches his disciples to pray, giving them what we know as the Lord's Prayer. After teaching them that, Jesus tells them a story of a man asking a friend for bread at midnight. Jesus makes the point of the story when he says, "I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need. So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." (Luke 11:8-10) Then in our second Bible reading from the book of James we're told, "The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective." (James 5:16) This truth was exemplified by the prophet Elijah who prayed for a drought, and the Lord granted it. Then, after three and a half years, Elijah prayed for rain, and the Lord granted that request as well.

God has chosen you. He has credited you with righteousness, just like he did with Abraham – not because you are so good, not because you earned it, not because he owes it to you, but because he wanted to gift it to you. He credited this righteousness to you when you heard the Word of the Lord, when you heard how he saves people from judgment, when you heard that he kept his promise through Abraham's descendants and brought Jesus into the world to be perfect for us, to be our substitute, to give us his righteousness. He clothed you with that righteousness in your baptism. By what Christ has done for you, you are right before God. You are righteous in his sight.

This means that you can pray as audaciously as Abraham did. God invites you to pray to him audaciously because he has chosen you, because he has credited righteousness to you. He is never going to get angry with you when you ask him over and over again for the same thing. He is never going to cast aside your prayers as if they don't matter. No! He invites you to ask, seek, and knock. He wants you to pray audaciously to him. This actually pleases him when your prayers are audacious. You have a problem? Take it to the Lord in prayer. Pray boldly and daringly that God take it away. As we heard last week, "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" (Genesis 18:14) You can pray audaciously to God for anything and everything, and you can be confident that God will answer it in the best possible way.

Consider how God answered Abraham's prayer. For the sake of ten righteous people in the area of Sodom, God said that he would spare the city. He happily and immediately granted Abraham's petition. Turns out that there were only four righteous people in Sodom: Lot, Lot's wife, and their two daughters. So, God did not spare Sodom and Gomorrah from his judgment. He rained burning sulfur upon them. But, at the same time, he answered Abraham's prayer. He did not sweep the righteous away with the wicked. Those two other visitors who were with Abraham, those angels, they came and rescued Lot and his family from Sodom. The Lord protected those whom he had chosen, those whom he had credited with righteousness. He answered Abraham's prayer by mercifully saving the righteous while at the same time justly punishing the rampant godlessness of Sodom and Gomorrah.

You and I, God has made us righteous through our baptism, through the hearing of Jesus' perfect life lived for us and his sacrifice on the cross. So pray boldly. Pray daringly. Pray audaciously. Pray audaciously for others like Abraham did. Pray audaciously for that friend who does not yet believe. Pray that God would bring them to faith. Pray audaciously that God would end the violence in this world and that we would live together in peace with no more murders or hatred. Pray that God would give us leaders in government who make God-pleasing decisions. Pray that God would remove your greatest pains and your smallest worries. Pray audaciously – boldly, daringly - like Abraham did because God invites us to do so and promises to answer us in the best possible way. Amen.